

The Earthquake Child

Elayne Klasson

She Writes Press (Jun 20, 2023)

Softcover \$17.95 (292pp)

978-1-64742-446-6

*The thoughts, feelings, and actions that go into adoption are explored in the novel *The Earthquake Child*, which glories in human faults and virtues.*

Elayne Klasson's novel *The Earthquake Child* concerns adoption, addiction, mourning, identity crises, and love.

Eleanor and Ron Russell are a wealthy California couple. He is a doctor; she is a professor. Together, they raise two children from Eleanor's previous marriage. Then they decide to adopt the baby of a psychologically abused teenage mother. The child, Joshua, is polite and obedient at first, but when he turns fifteen, he faces a personal reckoning. He prefers to be called Nick; he escapes from a "therapeutic" boarding school, hiking through the woods with two classmates for three days in an attempt to return to his friends on the streets of Northern California—the only people he feels he can trust.

Eleanor's perspective is weighted. She is a passionate woman who followed her intuition after an earthquake shook her to her core. When it comes to adoption, she is variously methodical and feverish. She faces a grave loss and Joshua's rebellious young adulthood with determination, learning to accept disappointments and pursue new companions when she needs to. But she also repeats herself on topics such as how out of control Joshua is, even while refusing to see how his behavior pales in comparison to that of his friends. She is overprotective, too, becoming representative of the enlarged sense of responsibility that stems from deciding to adopt.

While the book's opening (centered on Joshua's survival post-escape) is exciting, most of the story is told at a languid pace. It evades a climax or conclusion; subtle metaphors run throughout. In effect, these meandering storytelling decisions mirror the infinite process of adoption itself. Further, the narration sometimes deviates from Eleanor's and Joshua's perspectives, and to jarring effect, as when Joshua's birth mother (a people-pleaser who is demeaned by her mother) is centered in two chapters near the book's beginning to set up their separation. Her presence, as with the particulars of Joshua's improbable survival on the road, holds untapped depth and potential. Further, Joshua's inherited addiction to pills is a peripheral insinuation. More successful are the book's delicate and realistic details, as about how Joshua knows that people like it when he makes eye contact with him, the "muscle spasms" that Eleanor experiences in moments of grief, and the irony that Eleanor is a university professor specializing in child development; these result in greater understandings of the family's experiences and growth.

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SAMANTHA ANN EHLE (March 3, 2023)

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